

Spiritual Practices and Social Change:
Buddhist and Christian Approaches

Religion 370
Tuesday and Thursday – 1:00 p.m. – 2:15 p.m.

Callaway S 105

Geshe Lobsang Negi
ICIS 110
Office Hours: Wed. 1:00 –3:00 p.m.
(or by appointment)
PH: 404-712-9293
Snegi@emory.edu

Barbara A.B.Patterson
Callaway 219
Office Hours: Mon. 2:30 – 4 p.m.
Thurs. 3 – 4:30 p.m.
(Sign up sheet on my door)
Or by appointment
PH: 404 - 727-2541
bobbi.patterson@emory.edu or Learnlink: Bobbi Patterson

I. Course Goals and Objectives

General Goals

This course is designed to provide basic understandings of the foundational assumptions, teachings and practices of the contemplative traditions in Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity. How these contemplative traditions shape and inform the social engagement/social change traditions in each religion will be explored. We will consider the interrelationships of spiritual practices and social change on several levels, individual, institutional, and global. We will explore the expressions of such integration in individual, social, and institutional contexts. Particular attention will be paid to how identity is reconstructed through such teachings and how that reconstruction leads to self-empowerment for social and communal change.

The theoretical objectives of the class are to develop conceptual, philosophical/theological, and practical, understandings of the ways these two traditions define and enact the interrelatedness of spiritual teachings and practices with social change. We will explore the similarities and differences of these two traditions particularly focusing on topics such as compassion, suffering, happiness, interdependence and love.

The analytical objectives of the class are to develop stronger skills for critical thinking about texts and practices. We will examine what each tradition assumes about spiritual practices and social change and how these assumptions shape methods of practices for arousing motivation, intention, and action. Our comparative approach will foster analytical skills including how to identify and distinguish between traditions, and how to determine points of convergence.

The behavioral and attitudinal objectives of the class are to heighten awareness of how religious traditions can positively affect social change on individual and systemic levels. Because the class includes experience-based learning, individuals will be asked to respectfully engage in some basic practices and activities related to social change. These exercises will be structured and sequenced so that students can reflect not only on meanings associated with the practices but also on how doing the practices affected them personally.

II. Course Methods and Practices

There will be in-class and beyond class structured opportunities for students and teachers to observe and practice specific spiritual practices. We will do limited fieldwork in local sites where spiritual practices are occurring and examine if and how those individuals and/or communities are also involved in social change. The Christian exploration of the integration of spiritual practices and social change will focus on topics of the environment.

The course is participatory. Reading the assignments and joining in class discussions and activities is *very* important. There will be small group work. We will continually ask how what we are reading, doing, thinking about, and/or seeing is related to spiritual practices and their integration with and effect upon social action/transformation of the world.

III. Texts

Texts below will be used in the class. Other readings may also be assigned.

William Hart, *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation: As Taught by S.N. Goenka*

Robert A. Thurman, *Essential Tibetan Buddhism*

Thubten Chodron, *Working with Anger*

Dorotheus of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*

Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*

Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into The Future*

Other selected readings will come from the following authors:

Thomas Merton (*When the Trees Say Nothing*)

Sally McFague (*Supernatural Christians*)

Dorothee Soelle (*The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*)

IV. Assignments

There will be two quizzes during class.

The **Mid-Point Project** will be due **October 28**. This is an observation project through which each student will observe a community of spiritual practice in order to initially determine if that community:

- 1) views change for the common good as integral to their practice and teaching;
- 2) engages in such change.

The paper should briefly address the history and tradition of the organization, its schedule of practices/rituals/worship services and its public claims of social engagement for the common good. Additional observations and informal conversations/interviews with member should add clarity to the paper's claims about the integration of social change work and spiritual practice. The paper should be 6-8 pages.

The **Final Project/Paper** will be due **November 30 at 5 p.m.**

The Final Project/Paper is an imaginative, integration exercise (between 10-12 pages). Choose a contemporary issue, need, or problem that you would like to see addressed, even if only in an initial way. Bring a text and practice (or two) that we have studied in the class or one that is approved by the teachers to bear on that issue/need/problem. Demonstrating analytical knowledge of the source and context of that text and practice, you should retranslate it for use today to shape a plan of action for compassionate social change. Since our working themes for the semester are equanimity and anger, environmental sustainability and justice, and poverty and justice, we would welcome projects addressing these areas, but you are not bound to these topics. Choose something for which you have a passion.

Points for Assignments

Participation	150
Quizzes	200
Mid-Point Paper	300
Final Project/Paper	350
Total Points for course	1,000

I. Introduction

August 26: How we got here...Where we hope to go

II. Foundational Understandings

Tibetan Buddhism

August 31 The Four Noble Truths, the Foundations of Tibetan Buddhism
Vipassana Meditation pp. 10-43

September 2 Samsara/Nivana
Vipassana Meditation pp. 45-54 and Handout

September 7 Three Special Trainings and Eight Fold Noble Path
Vipassana Meditation pp. 55-82

September 9 Continuation of Three Special Trainings and Eight Fold Noble Path
Vipassana Meditation pp. 83-117

September 14 – Quiz on Buddhist Understandings of the Interrelationship of Spiritual Practices and Social Change

Christianity

September 16 Foundations of Christian Contemplative Spirituality
“The Passions and the Virtues –
Selections from *The Silent Cry* by Dorothee Soelle

September 21 Dorotheos of Gaza; Humility
Discourses and Sayings pp. 94-99

September 23 On Building the House of the Soul; Dialogue with the Cellarer; Maxims
in *Discourses and Sayings* pp. 201-211; 241-243; 251-253

September 28 Anger: Refusal to Judge; On Rancor and Animosity
Discourses and Sayings pp. 131-137; 149-155

Date to be determined
Mandala Workshop – Hands on Learning

Followed by Sampling of Tibetan Food
DUC Lobby

September 30 – Quiz on Christian Understandings of the Interrelationship of Spiritual Practices and Social Change

II. Religion and Social Change – Examples

- October 5 *Working with Anger*
- October 7 *Working with Anger*
- October 14 *Working with Anger*
- October 19 *When the Trees Say Nothing* (Thomas Merton)
- October 21 *When the Trees Say Nothing* (Thomas Merton)
- October 26 “Possession and Possessionlessness” – Chapter in *The Silent Cry*
(Dorothee Soelle)
- October 28 Open Discussion

DUE OCTOBER 28: MID-POINT PROJECT

III. Specific Texts: More Depth

Tibetan Buddhism

- November 2 Meeting the Buddha in the Mentor
Essential Tibetan Buddhism pp. 48-59, 96-111
- November 4 Transcendent Renunciation
Essential Tibetan Buddhism pp. 115-134
- November 9 Loving Spirit of Enlightenment
Essential Tibetan Buddhism pp. 135-168
- November 11 Liberating Wisdom
Essential Tibetan Buddhism pp. 169-202 (212 if you want)

Christianity

- November 16 *The Great Work* (Thomas Berry) pp. xi – 99

- November 18 Guest Speaker: Sally Wylde, founder and director of the
Oakhurst Community Garden
- November 23 *The Great Work* (Thomas Berry) pp. 100-107; 136-149; 159 – 201
- November 30 Guest Speaker: The Rt. Rev. Frank Allan (woodworker volunteer
at Emmaus House)
Jesus and the Disinherited (Howard Thurman) pp. 11-57
- December 2 *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Howard Thurman) pp.58- 112
- December 7 Final Discussion
“Saying Yes and Saying No” by Shawn Copeland in
Practicing Our Faith (hand-out)